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AUGUST

CLEAN START

LTH WAS UNEASY. OUTSIDE THE SHIP, EARTH LAY DEAD. THE DAPPLED SUNLIGHT STILL FLECKED THE FOREST FLOOR, THE LEAVES STILL RUSTLED SOFTLY IN THE GENTLE WIND, BUT THE ANIMAL AND INSECT LIFE THAT HAD ONCE ROAMED THIS VERDANT PLANET WAS NO MORE. IT HAD BEEN ERASED. HERE LAY THE TINY BODY OF A BIRD... THERE, THE CORPSE OF A DEER. ALL SEEMED TO HAVE GONE WELL, YET BRX SHOULD HAVE RETURNED BY NOW. LTH STIRRED RESTLESSLY. BEHIND HER, THE MAN-THING STIRRED ALSO. LTH EXTENDED A PSEUDOPOD FROM THE PROTOPLASMIC MASS THAT WAS HER BODY...

THE EYE FORMED. LTH STUDIED THE MAN-THING. SHE WATCHED HIM STRUGGLE TO HIS FEET...TURN DAZEDLY... AND STARE AT HER, HIS FACE A MASK OF DISBELIEF...

POOR LITTLE EARTHLING. THERE WAS SO MUCH HORROR AWAITING HIM. LTH WAS COMPASSIONATE; TIME ENOUGH LATER FOR HIM TO FACE REALITY. HER THOUGHT WAVE STRUCK HIS BRAIN LIKE A TRIP-HAMMER...

THE MAN-THING FELL BACK, STUNNED, AND SANK TO THE DECK-PLATES. LTH RETURNED TO HER MUSINGS. IN A WAY, SHE REGRETTED WHAT SHE AND BRX HAD DONE. BUT HAD NOT THE PROCTORS SAID... "BY ANY MEANS!"?

YOUR *TASK*, THEREFORE, IS TO *INSURE, BY ANY MEANS*, THAT THE THIRD PLANET WILL NOT BRING *DISHARMONY* TO THIS FEDERATION!

LTH REMEMBERED. THE REPRESENTATIVES OF EVERY PLANET OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM ...EXCEPT ONE. IT HAD BEEN ONE OF LTH'S KIND WHO HAD VOICED THE WORDS...

THE *METHOD* WE LEAVE TO *YOU!* EARTH IS NOW ENTERING THE *THIRD DEVELOPMENT STAGE*... *NUCLEAR FISSION!* YOU KNOW THE *FOURTH* STAGE...

YES! *SPACE TRAVEL*...AND THEN... *TIME TRAVEL!*

EXACTLY! MAN, AS THE DOMINANT LIFE FORM ON THE THIRD PLANET CALLS ITSELF, WILL HAVE TO BE BROUGHT INTO THE *SOLAR FEDERATION* WHEN THAT HAPPENS!

AND MAN IS *UNFIT* TO TAKE A PLACE IN OUR FEDERATION?

MAN IS A BRAWLING, BLOODTHIRSTY SAVAGE WHO WOULD DESTROY US ALL! HE MUST BE *MADE FIT!* THAT...IS *YOUR* PROBLEM, *LTH* AND *BRX!*

SOMEWHERE...AT SOME MOMENT IN ITS HISTORY... THE RACE OF MAN TOOK A *WRONG TURNING!* IT CHOSE, INSTEAD OF *PEACE*, A PATH OF *VIOLENCE!* YOU MUST *FIND* THAT EXACT MOMENT AND *PREVENT* MAN FROM TAKING THAT WRONG TURN SO THAT HE WILL DEVELOP *PEACEFULLY*... AS *WE* HAVE!

THE PROBLEM HAD NOT SEEMED DIFFICULT TO LTH... THEN. ALTER A TINY INCIDENT IN THE TIME-CONTINUUM AND YOU ALTER THE FUTURE FOR ALL ETERNITY! BUT LATER, IN THE SHIP, ON THE TRIP THERE, LTH HAD HAD DOUBTS...

BRX! PERHAPS...PERHAPS IT WOULD BE BEST IF WE ONLY OBSERVED FROM A *DISTANCE* AT FIRST!

TIME IS SO...SO *VAST*, BRX! GIVEN TIME, MAN MIGHT TAKE THE WAY OF PEACE OF HIS *OWN* ACCORD. WHAT IF *WE* CHOOSE THE...THE *WRONG* MOMENT?

WE ARE *SCIENTISTS*, LTH! WE SHALL CHOOSE THE *RIGHT* MOMENT! BUT PERHAPS IT WOULD BE BETTER... FOR NOW... MERELY TO *OBSERVE!*

LTH SHUDDERED AS SHE REMEMBERED. BRX'S EXTENDED POD HAD FLICKED A CONTROL AND THE SHIP HAD FLASHED OUT OF THE EMPTINESS OF TIMELESS SPACE INTO THE PRESENT. AND HER BRAIN HAD REELED AT WHAT SHE'D SEEN...

THE HORROR OF IT HAD MADE LTH ILL. THE TAKING OF ONE LIFE SHE COULD UNDERSTAND... IF IT WERE FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL LIFE. BUT THIS... THIS WAS SHEER BUTCHERY...

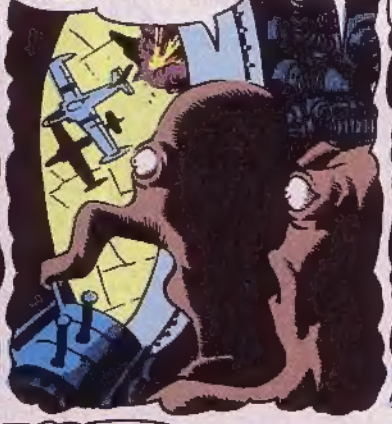
THEY... OH, BRX, DO YOU *FEEL* IT? THOSE CREATURES ...KILLING EACH OTHER...TEARING EACH OTHER'S BODIES! THEY *WANT* TO KILL! *WHY!?*

BECAUSE...YES, I CAN CATCH THEIR THOUGHTS... BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT THEY CALL *WAR!* BUT THEIR THOUGHTS ARE *CONFUSED!* MY *OWN* BRAIN FEELS AS IF IT IS ABOUT TO SPLIT! THE MOMENT WE SEEK IS *NOT* IN THE *PRESENT!*

BRX REACHED FOR THE CONTROLS...

IF WE REMAIN *HERE*, THE ACCUMULATED HATE IN ALL OF THOSE CRAZED MINDS DOWN THERE WILL DRIVE *US* MAD!

YES, BRX! HURRY! *HURRY!*



THEIR SHIP HAD FLICKED BACK INTO THE BLESSED DEAD-EMPTINESS OF TIMELESS SPACE, AND LTH AND BRX HAD SAT SILENT, RECOVERING...

IT SEEMS THAT OUR TASK WILL NOT BE *EASY!* THOSE... THOSE *THINGS* HARDLY SEEM WORTH *CARING* ABOUT. BUT AT LEAST WE KNOW WHAT TO *EXPECT!*

WE MUST FORCE OURSELVES TO THINK *COLDLY!* WE MUST *FORGET* DISGUST AND PITY AND LOOK UPON MAN ONLY AS A *PROBLEM!*

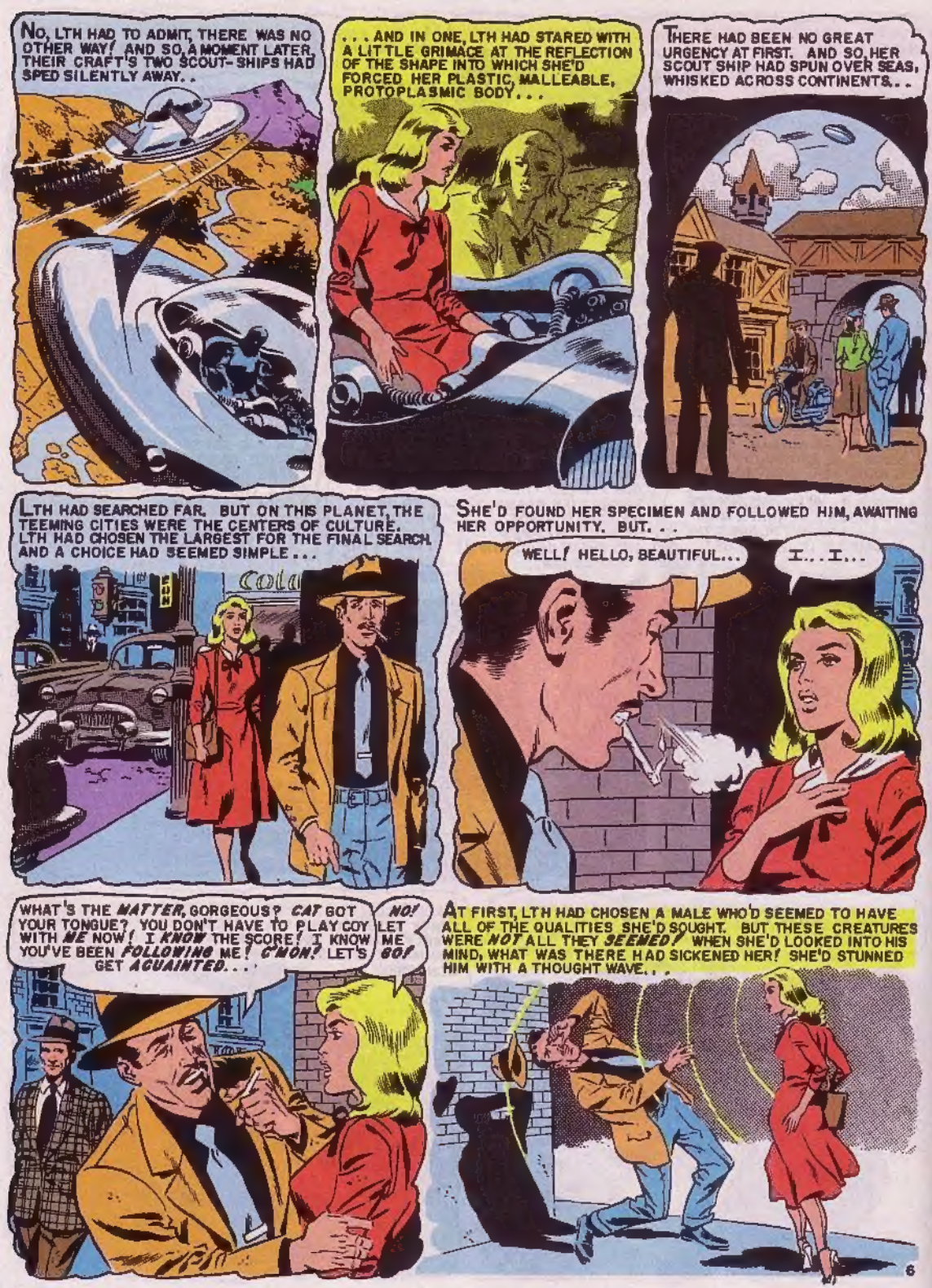
I *KNOW!* BUT...BRX! THOSE *POOR, INSANE CREATURES! KILLING! DESTROYING! WHY!?* FOR *WHAT?*

AGAIN BRX REACHED FOR THE CONTROLS...

WHEN WE *KNOW* WHY MAN KILLS, WE SHALL BE ABLE TO FIND A *CURE!* THE RACE IS *INTELLIGENT*, THEREFORE IT MUST *SURVIVE!* THAT IS *FEDERATION LAW!* WE MUST FIND THE MOMENT WHEN MAN *FIRST BEGAN* TO...TO *KILL!*

FIND THAT MOMENT, AND ALTER MAN'S HISTORY! IT HAD BEEN SO EASY TO SAY. THE SHIP HAD SPED BACKWARD IN TIME. BUT ALWAYS, THE PATTERN WAS THE SAME...
STILL THEY FIGHT... BROTHER AGAINST BROTHER, EVEN! THE SAME... INSANITY...
BRX! ENOUGH! ALL THOSE THOUGHTS... ALL THAT HATE! I GROW FAINT! ENOUGH!
LET US GO BACK STILL FURTHER IN TIME. SOMEWHERE IN THEIR HISTORY, SURELY, MEN WERE NOT LIKE THIS!
AT FIRST, LTH HAD PITIED THE POOR CREATURES AS THEY SLAUGHTERED EACH OTHER. SHE AND BRX HAD EVEN MINGLED WITH MAN ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS.
THE FOOLS! LOOK HOW SOME OF THEM SUFFER BECAUSE OTHERS DESIRE POWER OVER THEM...
THEIR PLANET COULD BE A PLACE OF PEACE AND PLENTY, BUT THEY WILL NOT HAVE IT SO!
THEY KNOW NO BETTER, BRX! IT WAS YOUR DESIRE THAT WE ASSUME THEIR FORM AND MINGLE WITH THEM! HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH?
NO, LTH! SOMEWHERE WE WILL FIND WHAT WE SEEK. WE WILL GO FURTHER BACK IN TIME. THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A TIME WHEN MAN WAS NOT LIKE THIS! THERE MUST HAVE BEEN!
BUT THERE HAD BEEN NO SUCH TIME...
SPQR
4

ALWAYS, NO MATTER HOW FAR BACK THEY'D GONE, IT HAD BEEN THE SAME...
IN THE END, LTH AND BRX HAD KNOWN THE TRUTH. MAN HAD NEVER KNOWN THE PATH OF PEACE. AND BRX HAD VOICED HIS SOLUTION...
IT IS NO USE, LTH! THERE IS ONLY ONE ANSWER! MAN... MUST START OVER AGAIN!
MAN MUST BE GUIDED...TAUGHT ...FROM THE BEGINNING! IF THE RACE WERE DESTROYED, AND ONLY TWO...A MALE AND A FEMALE...WERE PRESERVED, AND TAUGHT, PERHAPS MAN MIGHT MAKE HIS PLANET THE PARADISE IT COULD BE!
WE COULD GUIDE THE TWO SURVIVORS! AND WHEN THEY'D COMPLETED THEIR SHORT LIFE SPANS, WE COULD GUIDE THEIR CHILDREN... AND THEIR CHILDREN'S CHILDREN...
...UNTIL HATE AND VIOLENCE HAVE BEEN BRED AWAY AND MAN CAN GO ON TO A HISTORY OF PEACE AND A PLACE IN THE FEDERATION! YES! I SEE!
LTH HAD AGREED BECAUSE IT HAD SEEMED TO BE THE ONLY ANSWER. THERE HAD BEEN NO ONE TO SEE WHEN THEIR SHIP MATERIALIZED IN A FOREST ON EARTH...
I HAVE BROUGHT US BACK TO THE PRESENT SO THAT WE MAY FIND INTELLIGENT, ADVANCED SPECIMENS. YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO, LTH?
YES. I WILL FIND A MALE HUMAN OF THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE TYPE AND RETURN WITH HIM IN EXACTLY TEN EARTH DAYS!
AS I SHALL RETURN WITH A FEMALE! WE ARE AGREED, THEN...
CAREFULLY, BRX HAD SET "THE DESTROYER". IN TEN EARTH DAYS, TO THE SPLIT SECOND, IT WOULD ACTIVATE ITSELF. ENERGY WOULD STREAM OUT IN ALL DIRECTIONS. AND MAN WOULD DIE. IT WAS NECESSARY. YET LTH WONDERED...
BRX! IS...IS THERE NO OTHER WAY!
NONE! THERE! IT IS SET! LET US BE OFF!

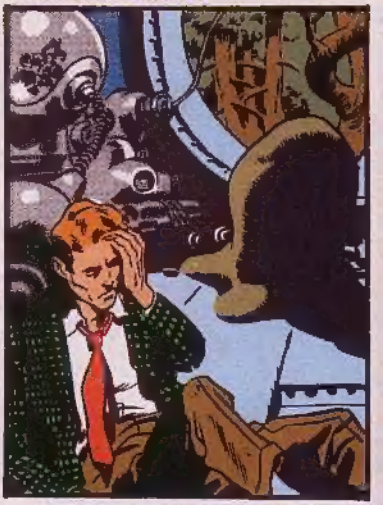

NO, LTH HAD TO ADMIT, THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY! AND SO, A MOMENT LATER, THEIR CRAFT'S TWO SCOUT-SHIPS HAD SPED SILENTLY AWAY..
. . . AND IN ONE, LTH HAD STARED WITH A LITTLE GRIMACE AT THE REFLECTION OF THE SHAPE INTO WHICH SHE'D FORCED HER PLASTIC, MALLEABLE, PROTOPLASMIC BODY. . .
THERE HAD BEEN NO GREAT URGENCY AT FIRST. AND SO, HER SCOUT SHIP HAD SPUN OVER SEAS, WHISKED ACROSS CONTINENTS. . .
LTH HAD SEARCHED FAR. BUT ON THIS PLANET, THE TEEMING CITIES WERE THE CENTERS OF CULTURE. LTH HAD CHOSEN THE LARGEST FOR THE FINAL SEARCH. AND A CHOICE HAD SEEMED SIMPLE . . .
SHE'D FOUND HER SPECIMEN AND FOLLOWED HIM, AWAITING HER OPPORTUNITY. BUT. . .
WELL! HELLO, BEAUTIFUL. . .
I. . . I. . .
WHAT'S THE *MATTER*, GORGEOUS? *CAT* GOT YOUR TONGUE? YOU DON'T HAVE TO PLAY COY WITH *ME* NOW! I *KNOW* THE SCORE! I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN *FOLLOWING* ME! *C'MON!* LET'S GET *ACQUAINTED*. . .
NO! LET ME *GO!*
AT FIRST, LTH HAD CHOSEN A MALE WHO'D SEEMED TO HAVE ALL OF THE QUALITIES SHE'D SOUGHT. BUT THESE CREATURES WERE *NOT* ALL THEY *SEEMED!* WHEN SHE'D LOOKED INTO HIS MIND, WHAT WAS THERE HAD SICKENED HER! SHE'D STUNNED HIM WITH A THOUGHT WAVE. . .

BUT, FOR THAT BAD ONE, THERE'D BEEN THOUSANDS OF GOOD ONES TO CHOOSE FROM. LTH HAD BEEN UNABLE TO MAKE UP HER MIND...
SHE'D LET TIME PASS. THE DAYS HAD SPED BY AND, IN THE END, TIME HAD SIMPLY RUN OUT...
ONLY A FEW MOMENTS LEFT!
SALE
IN SECONDS, "THE DESTROYER" WOULD ACTIVATE ITSELF! LTH HAD HAD TO CHOSE... THEN... AT ONCE... AT RANDOM ... BEFORE IT WAS TOO LATE...
HIM!
THE MALE HAD FALLEN UNCONSCIOUS, AND IN THAT INSTANT, LTH HAD THROWN A PROTECTIVE, INVISIBLE WEB OF COUNTER-ENERGY ABOUT HIM AND ABOUT HERSELF... JUST IN TIME...
SUDDENLY, THE CITY HAD BECOME SILENT. SUDDENLY, THE CITY HAD DIED. MAN HAD DIED. THERE'D BEEN NO NEED, THEN, FOR LTH'S DISGUISE. THE DESTROYER HAD DONE ITS WORK WELL...
SHE'D LIFTED HER PRIZE AND CARRIED HIM OUT OF THE STORE... OUT INTO THE DEAD CITY...
SHE'D MOVED THROUGH THE CITY SADLY... THROUGH THE SILENCE AND THE STILLNESS...

LTH SIGHED, REMEMBERING. YES, IT WAS A GREAT PITY. BUT THERE HAD BEEN NO CHOICE. BEHIND HER LAY THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF MAN. AND SOMEWHERE, OUT THERE, BRX WOULD BE COMING WITH ITS MATE...

BUT DARKNESS WAS SETTING IN NOW... DARKNESS, LIKE A MOURNING VEIL OVER THE DEATH ALL AROUND THE SHIP. LTH AROSE AND GLIDED TOWARD THE PORT...

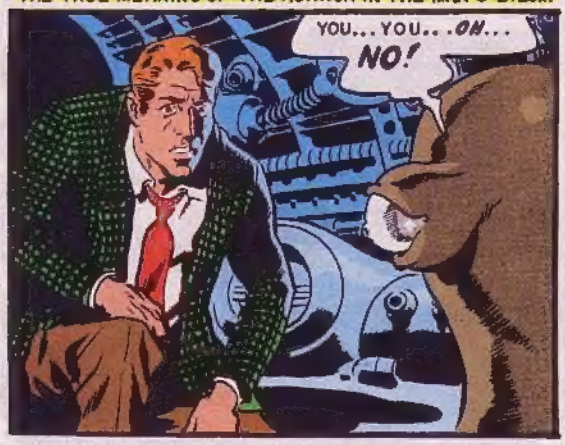
SHE SCANNED THE CLEARING, PEERING INTO THE LENGTHENING SHADOWS, ANXIOUSLY. BEHIND HER, THE MAN STIRRED AGAIN...



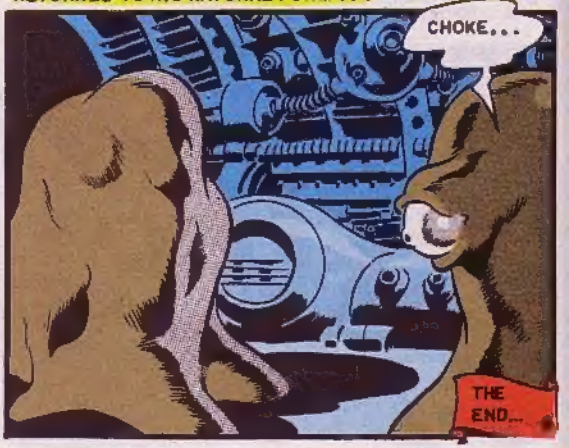
SOMETHING WAS WRONG. LTH COULD SENSE IT. HER ANXIETY AND WORRY HAD RELAXED HER MENTAL HOLD ON THE MAN BEHIND HER. HE SAT UP, STARING IN HORROR AT LTH...

AND WHEN LTH TURNED AND SAW THE HORROR IN THE MAN'S EYES, SHE WAS FILLED WITH PITY...

IT WAS THEN THAT THE MAN'S THOUGHTS REACHED OUT TO LTH. IT WAS THEN THAT SHE SUDDENLY UNDERSTOOD THE TRUE MEANING OF THE HORROR IN THE MAN'S EYES...



...EVEN BEFORE HIS BODY BEGAN TO DRAW INTO ITSELF ...TO CHANGE... TO LOSE ITS SHAPE. EVEN BEFORE BRX RETURNED TO HIS NATURAL FORM...



MARBLES

IT WAS A SOLEMN MOMENT FOR THE CAREFULLY PICKED AND EXTENSIVELY TRAINED CREW OF THE X-17. AFTER LONG MONTHS, THEY NOW STOOD UPON THE THRESHOLD OF FAME AND FORTUNE. A GLORIOUS ADVENTURE FOR THEM TWINKLED BECKONINGLY FROM THE VAST BLACK VOID OVERHEAD. THE X-17 WAS TO BE THE FIRST MAN-CARRYING ROCKET TO BE LAUNCHED FROM EARTH. THEY WOULD BE THE FIRST EARTHMEN TO REACH ANOTHER PLANET. THE FOUR MEN STARED UP AT THE STAR-STUDDED HEAVENS IN AWE AND FASCINATION

THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY BEGAN. THE BATTERY OF LOUDSPEAKERS DRONED OVER THE HUSHED CROWD OF GATHERED NOTABLES...

THE FIRST SPACE SHIP CAPABLE OF REACHING OTHER PLANETS IS READY FOR ITS PERILOUS JOURNEY. IN A FEW MOMENTS, A BUTTON WILL BE PUSHED. WORLD WILL CONTACT WORLD, THE UNIVERSE WILL SHRINK... AND MAN WILL BE ITS SHRINKER...

ALL OF THE YEARS OF RESEARCH... ALL OF THE EXPERIMENTATION AND THEORY AND TRIAL AND ERROR WERE ALMOST OVER...

AS THE X-17, WITH ITS HAND-PICKED CREW, HURTLES THROUGH SPACE TO ITS DESTINATION, EVERY INCH OF ITS TRIP WILL BE RECORDED HERE ON EARTH! EVERY EXPERIENCE OF THE MEN WITHIN HER ALLOY SHELL WILL BE NOTED DOWN. WE WILL BE IN CONSTANT COMMUNICATION...

THE LOUDSPEAKERS DRONED ON. THE GENERAL TURNED TO THE CREW MEMBERS... McGRAW... HOLLIS... ENKERS... DANTON...

EVERY PRECAUTION HAS BEEN TAKEN FOR YOUR SAFETY. EVERY SCIENTIFIC DEVICE... EVERY COMFORT KNOWN TO MAN HAS BEEN PLACED AT YOUR DISPOSAL. YOU WILL BE AS SAFE A MILLION MILES OUT IN SPACE AS YOU WOULD BE IN YOUR OWN BED AT HOME...

THE GENERAL LIFTED THE CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE...

TODAY, YOU STAND AS COLUMBUS STOOD OVER 450 YEARS AGO... ON THE BRINK OF THE UNKNOWN. MAY YOU MAKE AS STUPENDOUS AND EXCITING A DISCOVERY AS HE MADE IN HIS DAY! I HEREBY LAUNCH THE FIRST PLANET-BOUND ROCKET... THE X-17...

MOMENTS LATER, WITHIN THE X-17, FOUR MEN LAY IN THEIR SHOCK-COUCHES... AWAITING THEIR DESTINY...

READY, CAPTAIN McGRAW?

READY, SIR

A FINGER MOVED... BUTTONS CLICKED...

SAFETY

CLICK!

READY

BZZZZZZ

RELEASE

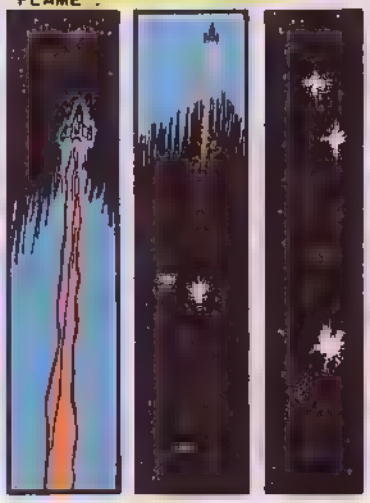
CLICK!

FIRE

... AND MAN REACHED FOR THE STARS WITH AN EAR-SPLITTING ROAR...

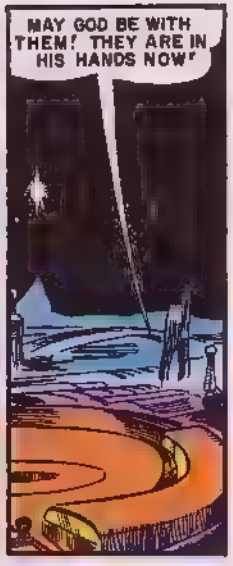
YES, MAN REACHED FOR THE STARS WITH A NEEDLE-NOSED MONSTER THAT SPIT AND HOWLED AND SHUDDERED...

...AND LEAPED UP INTO THE BLACKNESS ON A FINGER OF ORANGE FLAME.

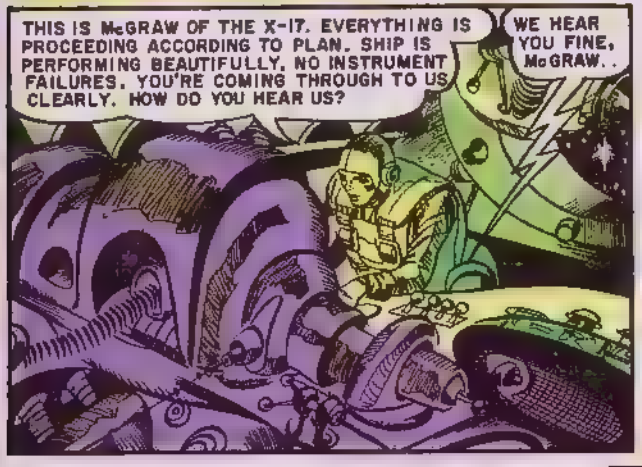


IT... IT'S OUT OF SIGHT!

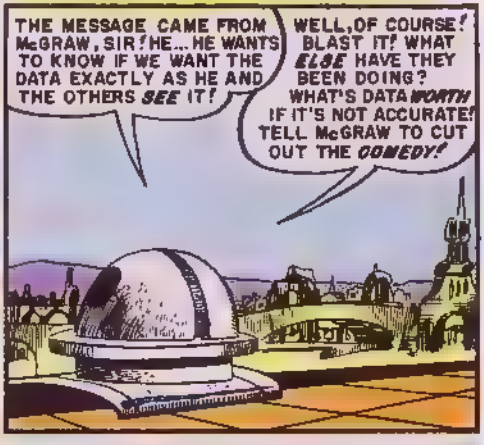
MAY GOD BE WITH THEM! THEY ARE IN HIS HANDS NOW!



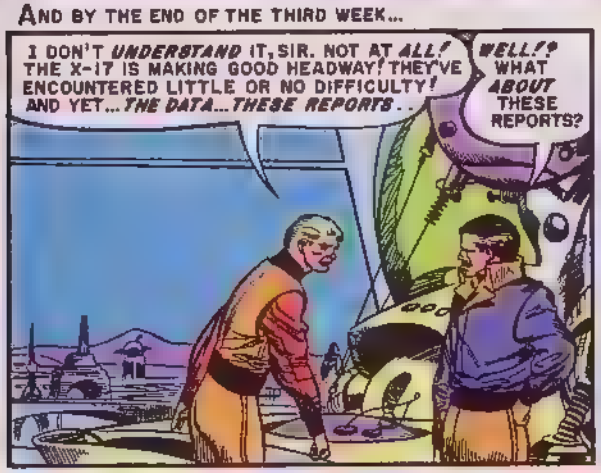
FOR THE FIRST FEW DAYS OF THE PIONEER SPACE VOYAGE, THE REPORTS CAME IN AS EXPECTED...



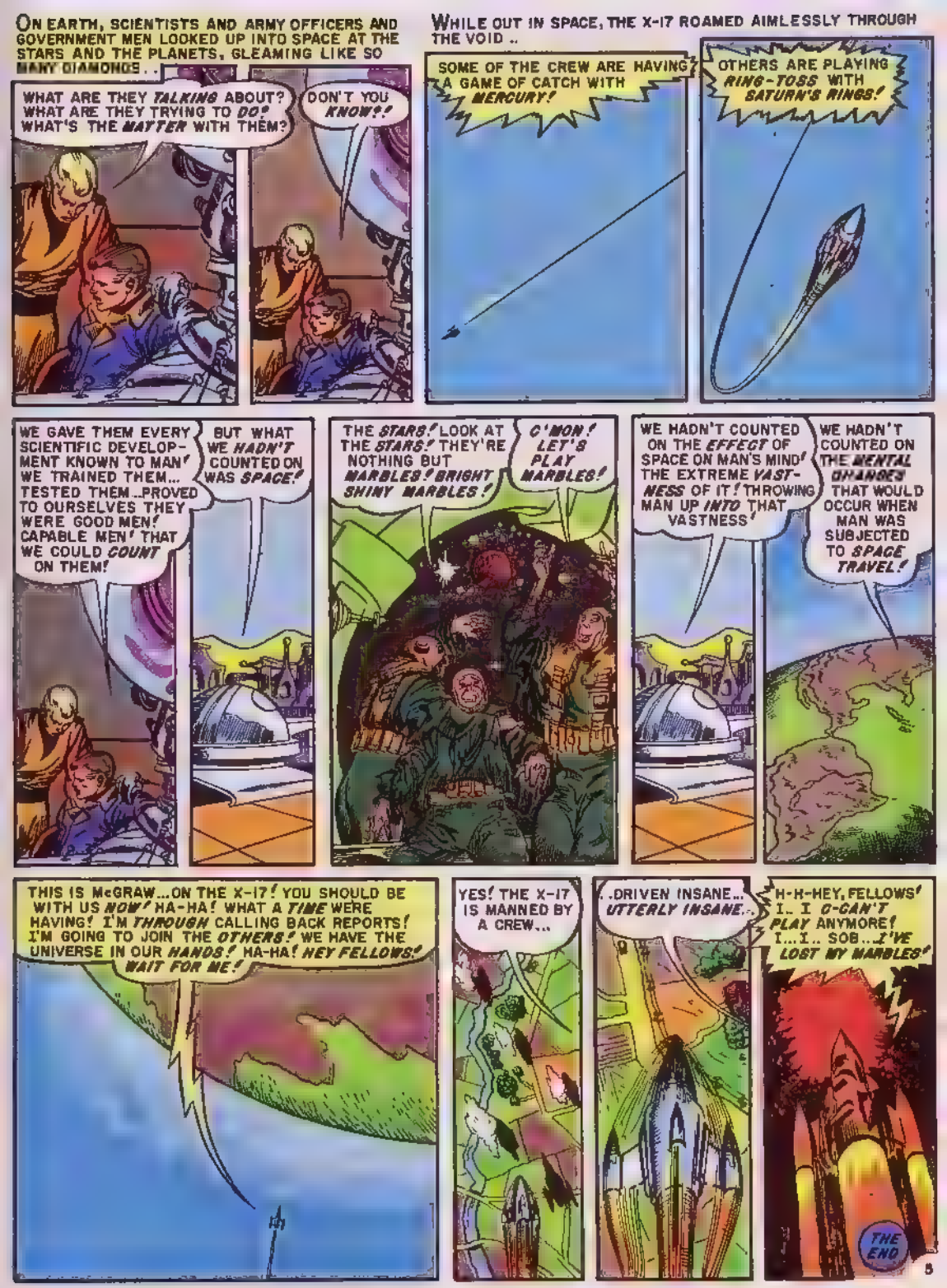
BUT BY THE END OF THE SECOND WEEK, A CURIOUS NOTE HAD CREPT INTO THE COMMUNICATIONS...



AND BY THE END OF THE THIRD WEEK...



ACROSS THE COLD VOID CRACKLED THE ELECTRONIC HUM OF HUMAN CONVERSATION AS A LONE SPACE-SHIP TRAILED A ZIG-ZAG COURSE THROUGH BLACK EMPTY SPACE..REPORTS THAT MOCKED MAN'S KNOWLEDGE DATA THAT LAUGHED AT SCIENCE...


ON EARTH, SCIENTISTS AND ARMY OFFICERS AND GOVERNMENT MEN LOOKED UP INTO SPACE AT THE STARS AND THE PLANETS, GLEAMING LIKE SO MANY DIAMONDS..
WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT? WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO DO? WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH THEM?
DON'T YOU KNOW?!
WHILE OUT IN SPACE, THE X-17 ROAMED AIMLESSLY THROUGH THE VOID ..
SOME OF THE CREW ARE HAVING A GAME OF CATCH WITH MERCURY!
OTHERS ARE PLAYING RING-TOSS WITH SATURN'S RINGS!
WE GAVE THEM EVERY SCIENTIFIC DEVELOPMENT KNOWN TO MAN! WE TRAINED THEM... TESTED THEM..PROVED TO OURSELVES THEY WERE GOOD MEN! CAPABLE MEN! THAT WE COULD COUNT ON THEM!
BUT WHAT WE HADN'T COUNTED ON WAS SPACE!
THE STARS! LOOK AT THE STARS! THEY'RE NOTHING BUT MARBLES! BRIGHT SHINY MARBLES!
C'MON! LET'S PLAY MARBLES!
WE HADN'T COUNTED ON THE EFFECT OF SPACE ON MAN'S MIND! THE EXTREME VASTNESS OF IT! THROWING MAN UP INTO THAT VASTNESS!
WE HADN'T COUNTED ON THE MENTAL CHANGES THAT WOULD OCCUR WHEN MAN WAS SUBJECTED TO SPACE TRAVEL!
THIS IS McGRAW...ON THE X-17! YOU SHOULD BE WITH US NOW! HA-HA! WHAT A TIME WE'RE HAVING! I'M THROUGH CALLING BACK REPORTS! I'M GOING TO JOIN THE OTHERS! WE HAVE THE UNIVERSE IN OUR HANDS! HA-HA! HEY FELLOWS! WAIT FOR ME!
YES! THE X-17 IS MANNED BY A CREW...
..DRIVEN INSANE... UTTERLY INSANE..
H-H-HEY, FELLOWS! I.. I C-CAN'T PLAY ANYMORE! I...I.. SOB...I'VE LOST MY MARBLES!
THE END

NOT EVEN A SPARROW SHALL FALL . . .

"Dear LORD," wrote old Elmo Danton, "we love our green Earth, age-old home of the human race. You must not carry it out—the end of the world! Please, LORD . . . please!"

To Elmo, LORD meant one thing . . . the Licensed Organization Reducing Deadworlds. He addressed the letter properly to the LORD, Universe Center. His eyes misted, then, as he drank in the amber sun sinking behind emerald hills. Must this beauty be wantonly destroyed by another year, as scheduled in the cosmic scheme of things? Elmo rebelled inwardly. A bird sang. Stars twinkled forth. The moon silvered down. A breeze sighed gently. He wept.

Most people took the end of the world more calmly than Elmo. After all, there were millions of other worlds in space, many better. And there was plenty of time to evacuate all living souls of the 29th century, in the gigantic space transports, to Procyon V, already picked as their new home.

Tragedy? Hardly. Especially since it was plain fact that Earth was now a poor world, denuded of all coal, oil, metals, uranium. Long since stripped of all resources, putting it on Galactic Relief for years now. On Procyon V, a rich young world, humans could once more make good economically, regaining pride, shedding the humiliation of being beggars.

But old Elmo was sentimental about it, and was angry as no answer came from the LORD. He tried a spacegram, spacephone call, everything. But he could not reach the LORD, to plead that the end of the world be cancelled. His friends pitied him, convinced he was completely unbalanced over Earth's doom.

"Elmo, be sensible," one friend said gently, firmly. "Snap out of it before it's too late. Who can change the great Galactic Plan? How ridiculous to expect the LORD to hear you, and save one tiny world from the scrapheap. Especially a worthless world like Earth is now."

"Yes," sighed Elmo, brokenly, "I guess the LORD won't listen to me about a worthless world like this. I'll give up trying to talk the LORD out of it."

To keep himself busy, before his call came on the space transports, Elmo went back to his job. For 25 years in the Geologic Survey, he had explored and mapped inner Earth with X-radar, down for a thousand miles. But his work was not done. It would never be finished now . . .

He sat up suddenly at the image forming on his X-radar screen, of a huge unknown pocket far below. The automatic analyzer readings of what lay there were fantastic. Not granite Igneous rock, lava, nor any of the usual wastes.

A gigantic mass of coal! Oceans of oil! Gold, copper, tungsten, germanium ores! And yes—plutonium, in vast heaps, more fissionable fuel than had ever been mined or dreamed of on the surface!

Elmo had to hurry, for already the signs of destruction had begun—whole mountain ranges ripping away from Earth—vast suctions like hurricanes whirling dirt clouds into space. Zero hour. Cataclysm begun . . .

Practically kidnapping the Secretary of Space to see his evidence and put through a top priority spacephone call, Elmo got through to Universe Center, on Sagittarius III, to the LORD. They too, all the LORD members, got excited when Elmo estimated the cache of resources waiting within Earth as a treasure of 100 trillion Galactic Dollars.

"Digging it up," Elmo concluded triumphantly, "earth will change over-night from an economic liability to an asset in the Galactic Union. You people of the LORD can't condemn my Earth as a worthless deadworld now."

"We're not fools," snapped back the executive of the LORD. "Luckily, we only started dismantling proceedings. Took away only a few mountain ranges with space tugs, for cheap building stone. And some black dirt in our Space Vacuum Sweeper. We can easily ferry back the few million Earthians sent to Procyon V. We hereby officially cancel the end of your world."

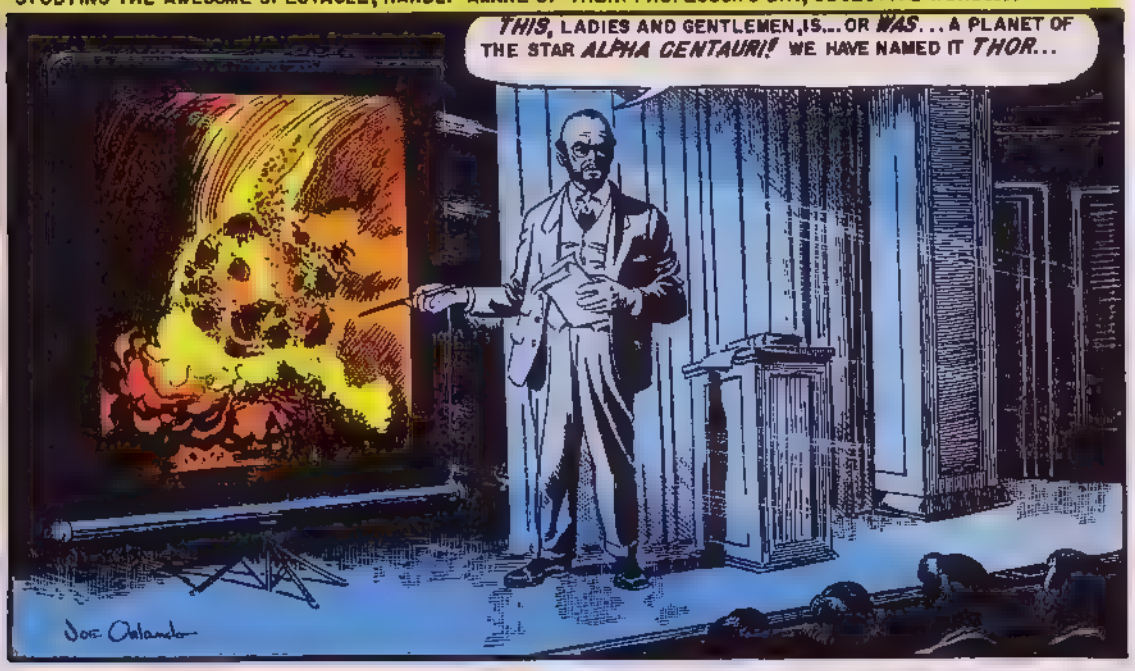
But when Elmo hung up, he was strangely quiet. He lifted his eyes upward humbly. "No," he breathed in great awe, fervently, "*they* didn't save Earth . . . not *that* LORD. They had nothing to do with the miracle of guiding my X-radar to that saving treasure far below, at the eleventh hour. I got through before to a *Higher* Power."

Elmo finished on his knees, head bowed.

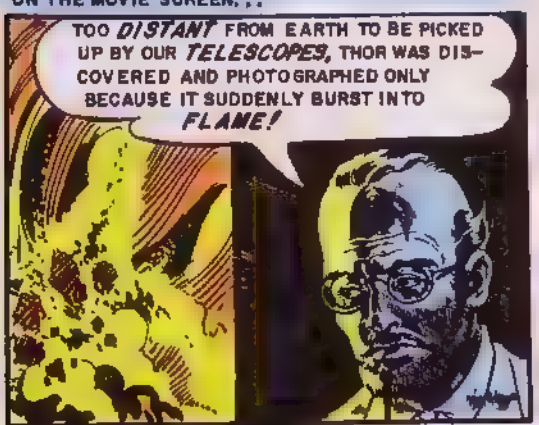
"Thanks, dear Lord . . ."

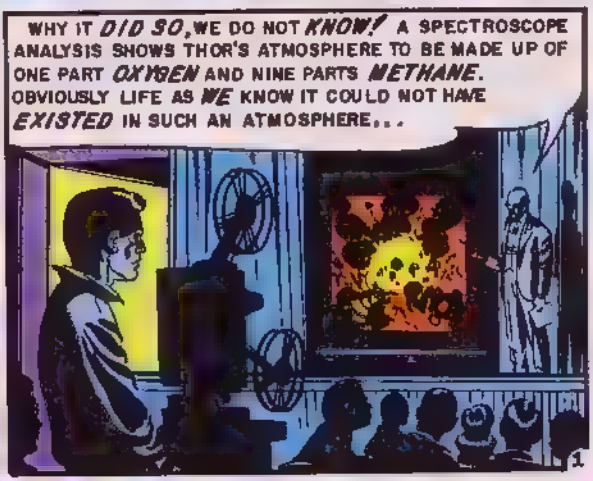
CONDITIONED REFLEX

PROLOGUE: ON THE SCREEN, A WORLD DIED. MOUNTAINS OF FLAME LEAPED TEN THOUSAND MILES INTO SPACE. AND AT THE FIRE'S HEART, A PLANET WRITHED. THE STUDENTS IN THE LECTURE HALL LEANED FORWARD, HUSHED, STUDYING THE AWESOME SPECTACLE, HARDLY AWARE OF THEIR PROFESSOR'S DRY, OBJECTIVE WORDS...

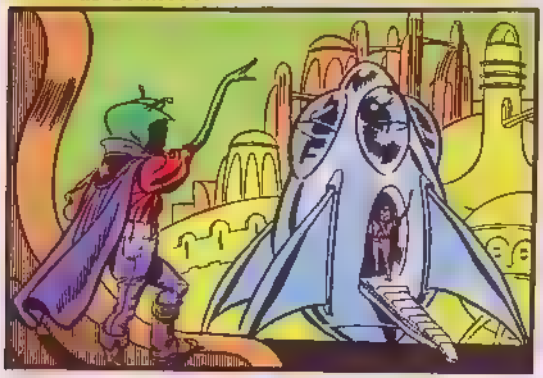


THE PROFESSOR MOTIONED TO THE FIERY IMAGE ON THE MOVIE SCREEN...

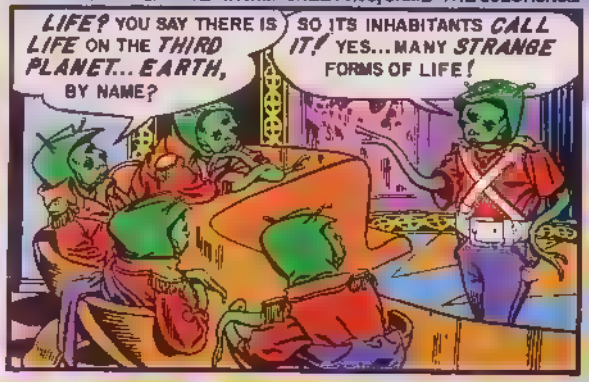


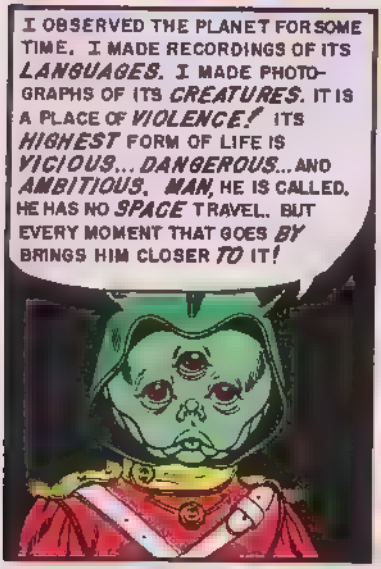


STORY: THE SHIP DESCENDED SLOWLY FROM SPACE. WHEN IT ENTERED THE METHANE ATMOSPHERE, ITS PLASTIC HULL WAS BARELY MOVING. THE MAGNETIC DRIVE IN ITS STERN HUMMED SOFTLY. THEN, THE SHIP TOUCHED DOWN...



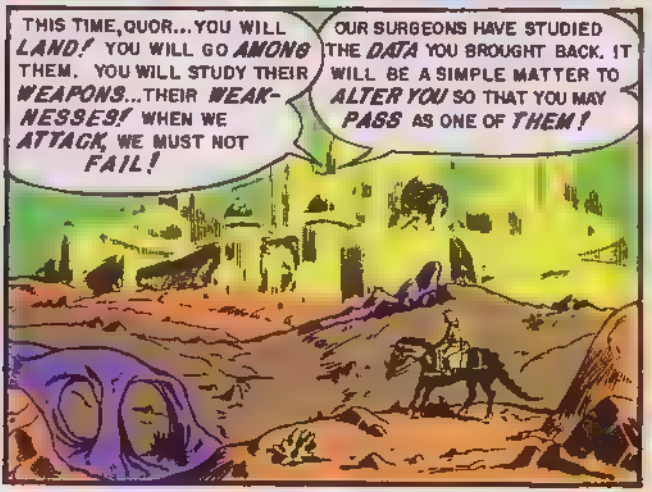
SWIFTLY, THE PILOT OF THE SHIP WAS CONDUCTED TO THE LEADERS. EACH LEADER, IN TURN, TOUCHED TENTACLES WITH HIM... A GREAT HONOR. FOR QUOR...THE PILOT...HAD JUST COMPLETED THE FIRST INTER-SOLAR-SYSTEM SPACE FLIGHT. AFTER THE WARM GREETING, CAME THE QUESTIONS...





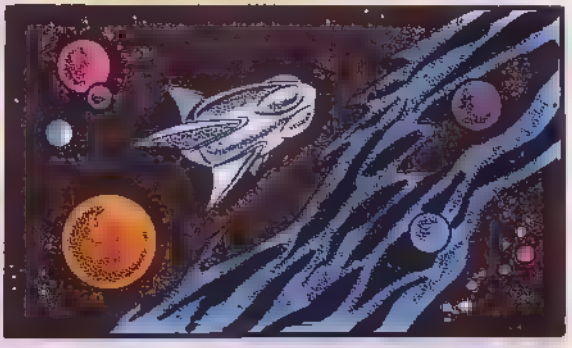
THE BODIES IN THE PLASTIC SEATS STIRRED UNEASILY. THE LEADERS DISMISSED QUOR AND CONFERRED IN HISSING WHISPERS...

ONCE AGAIN, QUOR WAS SUMMONED. THERE WAS NO QUESTION AS TO WHAT COURSE TO FOLLOW. LOGIC PROVIDED THE ANSWER...

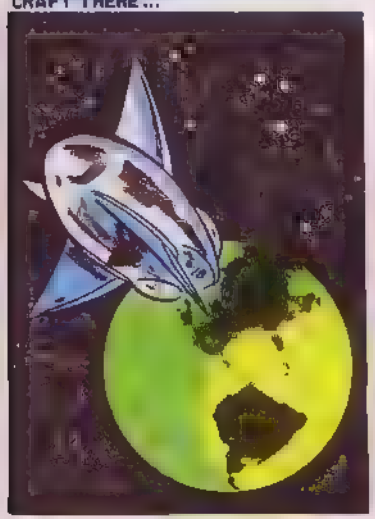


AND SO IT WAS. ONE DAY, THE LEADERS GATHERED AGAIN. ONE DAY, QUOR HAD MASTERED A LANGUAGE OF EARTH. ONE DAY, HE MOVED EASILY IN HIS NEW BODY...

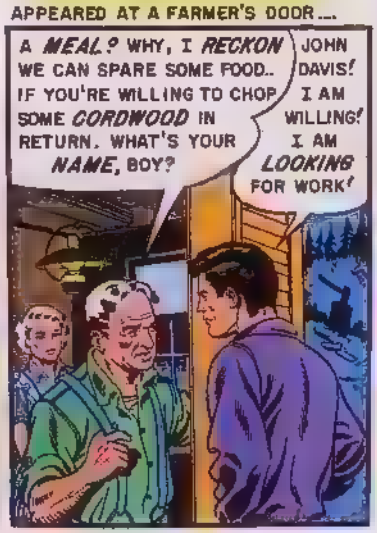
THIS TIME, THERE WAS NO TOUCHING OF TENTACLES. HOW COULD THERE BE? THE SHIP ROSE SLOWLY...SLOWLY. THEN, CLEAR OF THE ATMOSPHERE, IT RACED INTO SPACE, ITS MAGNETIC DRIVE WHINING...



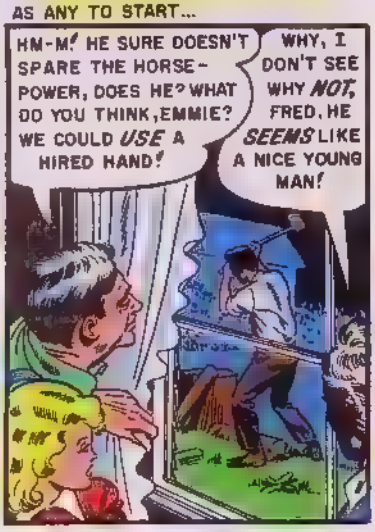
THE LANGUAGE QUOR HAD MASTERED HAD BEEN SPOKEN IN ONE OF THE MANY LAND AREAS OF THE THIRD PLANET. QUOR HEADED HIS SPACE CRAFT THERE...



THE SHIP LANDED AT NIGHT...SILENTLY. IT WAS THE WORK OF AN HOUR TO CONCEAL IT WITH BRUSH. ANOTHER HALF HOUR AFTER THAT, A YOUNG MAN APPEARED AT A FARMER'S DOOR...

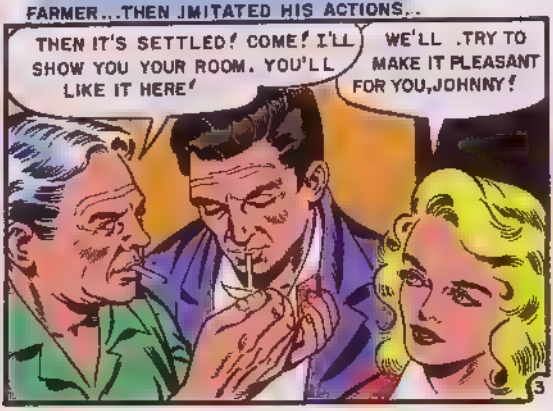


IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT QUOR LEARN EVERY MINUTE DETAIL OF BEING A MAN BEFORE HE COULD GO ON WITH HIS WORK. THIS WAS AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY TO START...



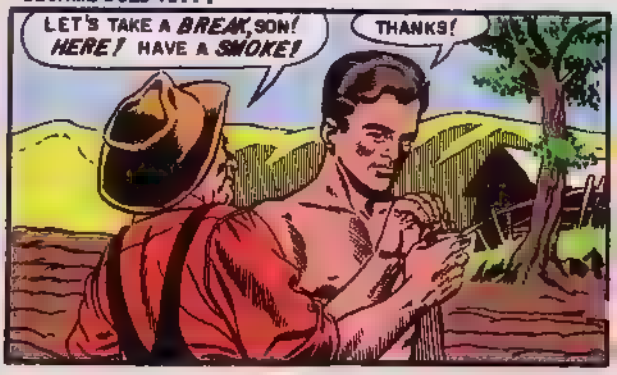
IT WAS SO EASY FOR QUOR TO BE ACCEPTED...TO FOOL THESE EARTHLINGS. QUOR LAUGHED INWARDLY LATER. EVEN AS HE GAGGED DOWN THE ALIEN FOOD BEFORE HIM. THEY WERE LIKE CHILDREN...

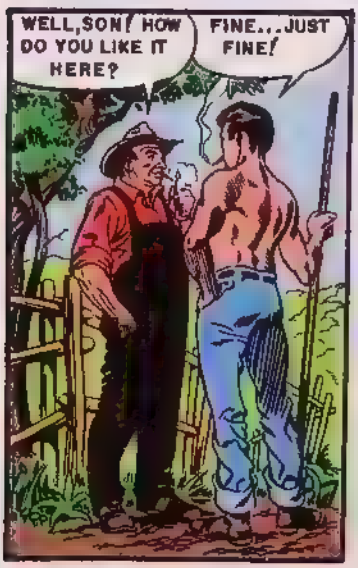
IT WAS IMPORTANT TO LEARN...TO LEARN EVERYTHING. QUOR ACCEPTED THE THIN WHITE TUBE...WATCHED THE FARMER...THEN IMITATED HIS ACTIONS...



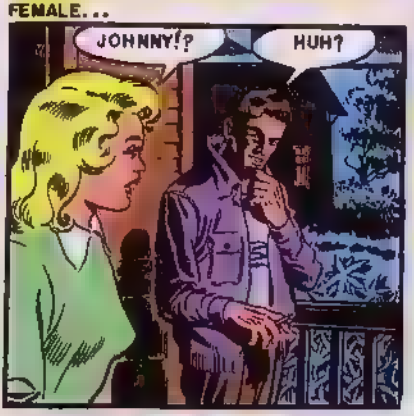
So! WHEN MEN WERE TENSE...WHEN THEY WERE NERVOUS... EXCITED... ENGROSSED IN IMPORTANT BUSINESS, THEY PUT A WHITE TUBE TO THEIR LIPS... LIT IT... AND RELAXED. QUOR SHUDDERED. HE WOULD REMEMBER IT FOR FUTURE REFERENCE, BUT NOW... HE WAS SICK. THE ALIEN FOOD AND THE WHITE VAPOR FROM THE WHITE TUBE HAD NOT AGREED WITH HIM. IN HIS ROOM, THE FOOD HE'D EATEN SPEWED UP...

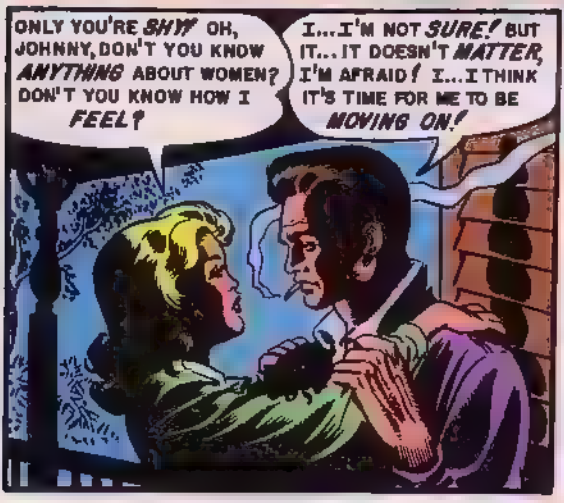
AN UNHAPPY BEGINNING, YES. BUT THIS WAS QUOR'S JOB. OBSERVE. LEARN. IMITATE. INTEGRATE. MOVE. FIND THE INFORMATION HIS LEADERS SOUGHT. QUOR ACCEPTED HIS ROLE... ALONG WITH ITS DISCOMFORTS. AND SOME HE EVEN BECAME USED TO...

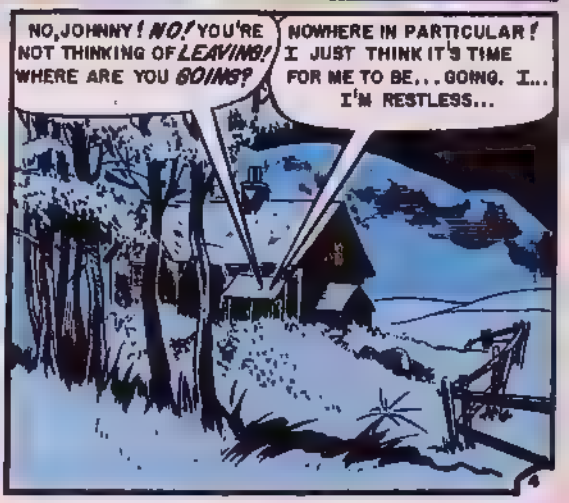




QUOR HAD NO DIFFICULTY LEARNING. HE SHUFFLED HIS FEET, LOOKED EMBARRASSED AS HE'D SEEN MEN DO... AND NONE SUSPECTED HIM. THERE WAS EVEN A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF AMUSEMENT TO BE FOUND... AT FIRST... WITH THE YOUNGER FEMALE...

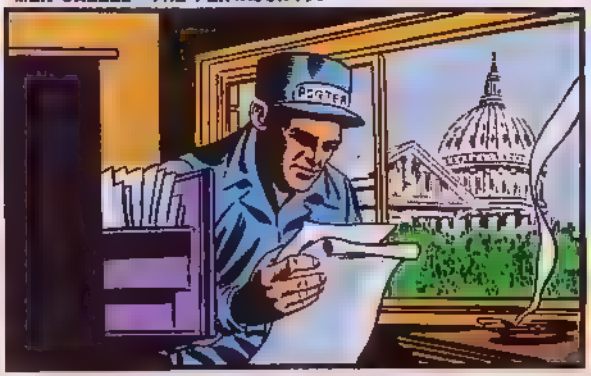






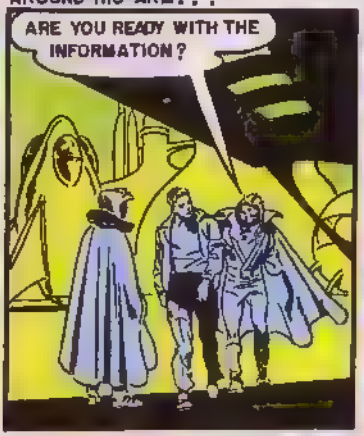
YES, THE FEMALE WAS A PROBLEM NEAR THE END. SHE SPOKE VAGUELY OF A THING CALLED LOVE, BUT QUOR KNEW THAT HE'D SUCCEEDED...THAT HE'D BEEN ACCEPTED AS A MAN. AND SO HE MOVED ON...

THE REST OF QUOR'S TASK WAS FAIRLY SIMPLE. ONCE SURE THAT WHEREVER HE WENT, HE WOULD NOT BE SUSPECTED, HE MOVED FAST. AT THE A-BOMB PROVING GROUNDS IN NEW MEXICO...IN THE BUILDING IN WASHINGTON, D.C., THAT MEN CALLED "THE PENTAGON"...



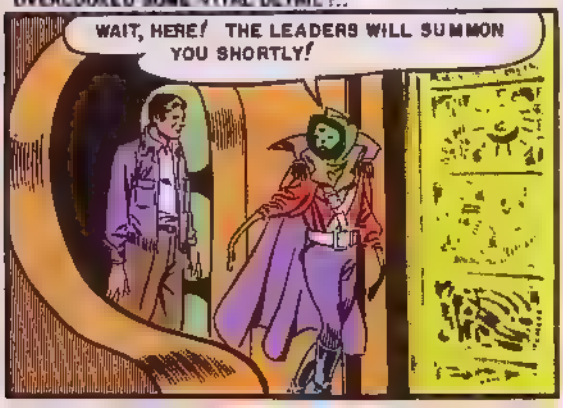
...QUOR GATHERED HIS INFORMATION. AND WHEN HE'D FINISHED, HIS SHIP ROSE SILENTLY FROM EARTH ONE NIGHT AND RACED HOMEWARD TOWARD THE STARS...

THEY MET HIM AT THE SPACEPORT, HIS PEOPLE. QUOR HAD NOT SEEN THEM IN SO LONG. HE SHUDDERED AS ONE OF THEM WOUND A TENACLE AROUND HIS ARM...



HAD HE BEEN AMONG MEN TOO LONG? HAD HE TRULY BEGUN TO LIVE AND THINK AND FEEL LIKE MEN? QUOR BREATHED DEEPLY OF THE FAMILIAR ATMOSPHERE AROUND HIM AND SMILED...

BUT QUOR WAS NOT READY. QUOR WAS NERVOUS. FRIGHTENED! HE COULD NOT HELP BUT WONDER. WHAT IF HIS INFORMATION WERE NOT COMPLETE? WHAT IF HE'D OVERLOOKED SOME VITAL DETAIL?..



QUOR PACED THE FLOOR BETWEEN THE TWO MASSIVE DOORS RESTLESSLY...AS A MAN MIGHT, HE NOTED WRYLY. YES. HE HAD LEARNED HIS PART WELL. HE'D CONDITIONED HIMSELF. HE ALMOST BEHAVED LIKE A MAN INSTINCTIVELY...

QUOR STOOD BEFORE HIS LEADERS... THE DATA IN HIS HAND...

I...I... CHOKE...

WELL? YOU BEHAVE STRANGELY, QUOR! WE ARE WAITING FOR YOUR REPORT! ARE YOU ILL?

N-NO! I AM NOT ILL... JUST... A LITTLE... TENSE!

SO? IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE! YOUR MISSION WAS OF INFINITE IMPORTANCE! RELAX, THEN! WE WILL WAIT UNTIL YOU HAVE CALMED DOWN...

QUOR SHOOK. HIS INFORMATION HAD TO BE SUFFICIENT. THE ENTIRE COUNCIL OF LEADERS WAS HERE... TO HEAR HIM! IT WAS AN HONOR BEYOND HONOR! SO MUCH DEPENDED UPON HIM! THEIR COLD INTELLIGENT EYES WATCHED HIM AS HE FUMBLED NERVOUSLY...

...WATCHED HIM AS HE TOOK THE LITTLE PACKAGE FROM HIS POCKET...WATCHED HIM AS HE PLACED A WHITE TUBE BETWEEN HIS LIPS...UNCONSCIOUSLY... WATCHED HIM AS HE RUBBED A RED-TIPPED STICK ON A BROWN STRIP OF...

BOOM!

EPILOGUE: THE PROFESSOR PAUSED AS IF TO MAKE CERTAIN THAT HE HAD HIS STUDENT'S FULL ATTENTION...

NO! THERE COULD HAVE BEEN NO LIFE ON THOR! NOT IN A METHANE ATMOSPHERE! AS YOU KNOW, METHANE IS A HIGHLY COMBUSTIBLE GAS! THE TINIEST SPARK IGNITES IT!

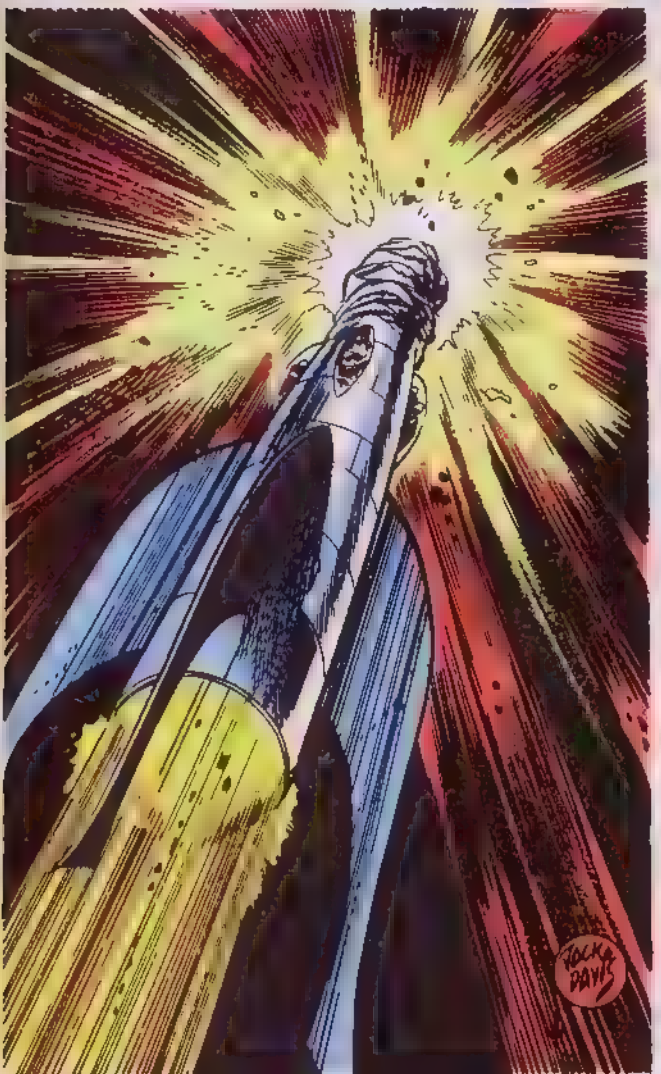
THE PROFESSOR STARED AT THE FLAMING FURY ON THE SCREEN...

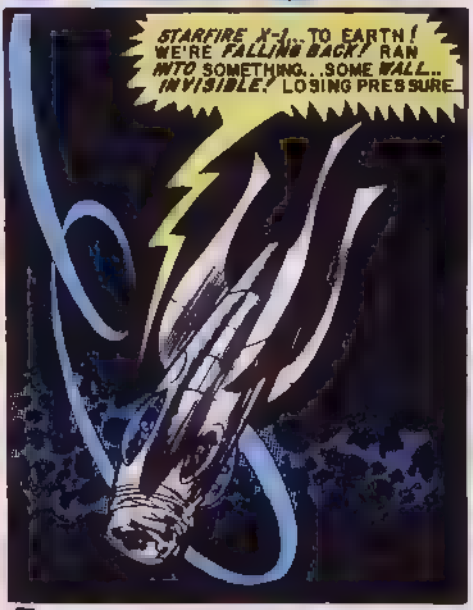
SOMEHOW, THOUGH, THOR'S ATMOSPHERE WAS IGNITED! THE PROBLEM IS, HOW? WOULD ANY OF YOU CARE TO VENTURE AN OPINION?

THE END!

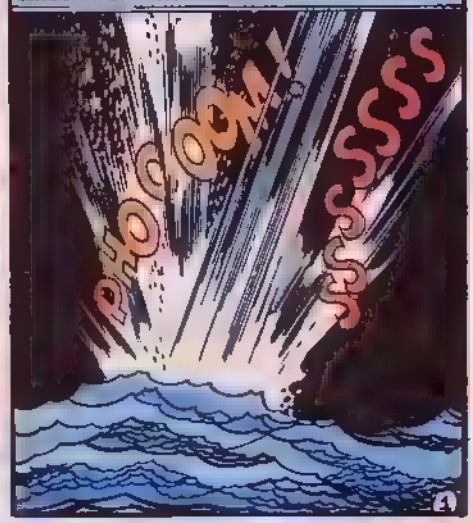
BARRIER

THE SHIP WAS A SYMPHONY OF POWER. MAN BUILT HER AND HURLED HER INTO THE VOID... TOWARD THE MOON. WHO FIRST REACHED LUNA...WHO FIRST SET UP BASES AND MISSILE LAUNCHING SITES ON LUNA, CONTROLLED EARTH! MAN IN HIS PRIDE AND IN HIS FEAR REACHED FOR THE STARS. THE SHIP ROSE ON STREAMING TENDRILS OF FLAME. AND THEN...IT DIED! IN THE BLACK EMPTY REACHES, SOMETHING INVISIBLE...SOMETHING IMPALPABLE HELD UP A GIANT PALM AND THE SHIP CRUSHED ITSELF AGAINST THAT PALM..





THE SHIP BECAME A CORPSE... A DEAD THING, DEFLECTED BACK ALONG ITS COURSE...GLOWING WHITE HOT FROM THE FRICTION OF RE-ENTERING EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. IT SCREAMED INTO THE NORTH ATLANTIC, SENDING UP A HISSING SKYSCRAPER-HIGH SPLASH...



THE SHIP DIED. AND AFTERWARD, THE MAN WHOSE DREAM SHE'D BEEN... THE MAN WHO'D BUILT HER... SAT WITH THE GENERALS AND THE STATESMEN...

GENTLEMEN! THERE'S NO *QUESTION* OF WHAT HAPPENED! THE *STARFIRE* WAS *DELIBERATELY DESTROYED!* WE DON'T KNOW *HOW*... BUT WE KNOW *WHO!*

YOU SUSPECT THE *EASTERN ALLIANCE*, GENERAL?

EXACTLY, PROFESSOR! FOR FORTY-EIGHT YEARS, EARTH HAS BEEN SPLIT INTO *TWO CAMPS!* FOR FORTY YEARS, WE'VE HAD *COLD WAR!* THE ANSWER IS *OBVIOUS!*

IT'S *NO SECRET* THAT THE WESTERN FEDERATION COUNTRIES ARE IN A *RACE* WITH THE EASTERN ALLIANCE, PROFESSOR!

WHICHEVER OF OUR GOVERNMENTS SETS UP THE FIRST MILITARY BASE ON THE *MOON* CAN DICTATE ITS *OWN TERMS!* OUR INTELLIGENCE REPORTS THAT THE EASTERN ALLIANCE'S ROCKET IS NOT YET *READY!*

SO... *WE* HAD TO BE *STOPPED!* BUT WE *WON'T* BE STOPPED!

PROFESSOR MILTON ENRIGHT SIGHED. WAR... ALWAYS WAR. MEN REACH FOR THE STARS AND THEY ARE STILL CHILDREN... FIGHTING AMONG THEMSELVES... PLAYING WITH FORCES THEY CANNOT COMPREHEND...

PROFESSOR ENRIGHT! YOU WILL BUILD A *SECOND STARFIRE!* BUT THE SHIP MUST BE COMPLETED IN *RECORD TIME!* WE MUST KNOW *WHAT DESTROYED* THE PREVIOUS SHIP! *THIS* ONE WILL BE *ARMED!* WILL YOU *DO* IT?

IT... SEEMS I HAVE NO *CHOICE*, GENERAL!

NO, THERE WAS NO CHOICE. THE RACE WAS MORE URGENT NOW MORE DEADLY. OUT IN THE SUNBAKED NORTH AMERICAN DESERT, AN ALLOY SKELETON BEGAN TO GROW. MAN POURED HIS SWEAT AND TOIL AND TREASURE INTO IT. AND FOR WHAT?

IT SEEMS A *PITY*, DOESN'T IT, GENERAL? OUT THERE, ALL THE *UNIVERSE* BECKONS! AND YET WE BUILD FOR *WAR!* FOR *DESTRUCTION!*

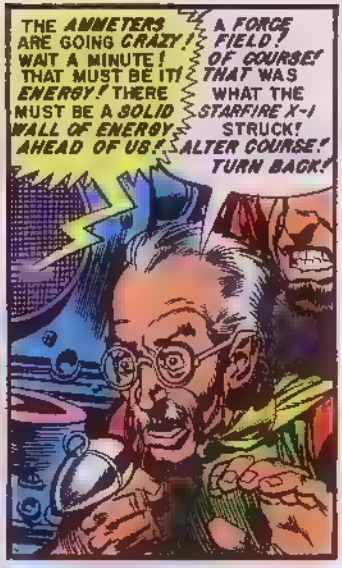
WE BUILD FOR *PEACE*, ENRIGHT! THERE WILL *BE* NO WAR IF WE CAN REACH LUNA *FIRST!* THE EASTERN ALLIANCE WOULD BE *HELPLESS*...

OF COURSE! *IF* WE ARE FIRST! AND *IF* WE CAN PENETRATE THE BARRIER THEY'VE PLACED BETWEEN US AND LUNA! *OTHERWISE*...

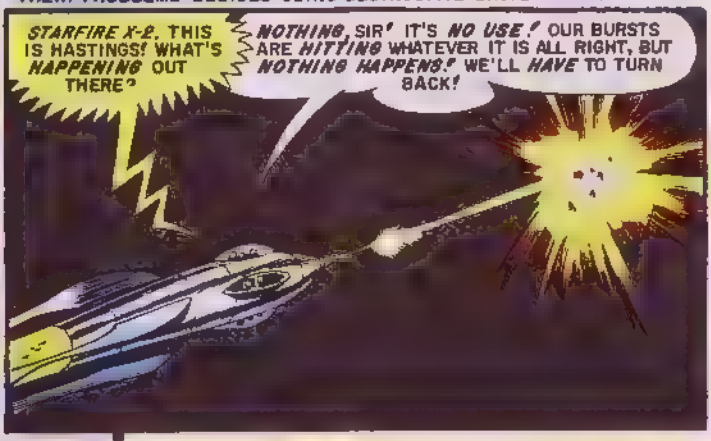
OTHERWISE, WHAT?! THE PROFESSOR DID NOT COMPLETE HIS THOUGHT. THAT WAS A PROBLEM FOR STATESMEN AND GENERALS! THE PROFESSOR WAS A *MAN OF SCIENCE!* HE BUILT! AND HE BUILT WELL...

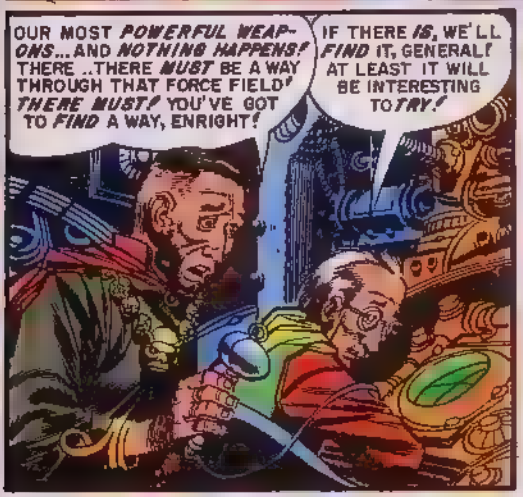
VOOOM

YES, THE PROFESSOR BUILT WELL... AND SWIFTLY. THERE WAS A DAY, AT LAST, WHEN A SECOND SONG OF POWER SANG INTO SPACE..

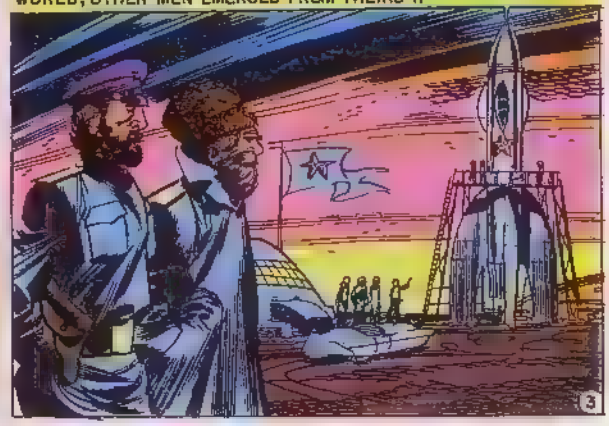


BLAST! DESTROY! TEAR TO PIECES! PROFESSOR ENRIGHT SHUDDERED. WOULD MEN NEVER LEARN THAT THERE WERE OTHER WAYS TO RESOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS BESIDES USING DESTRUCTIVE BRUTE FORCE?...





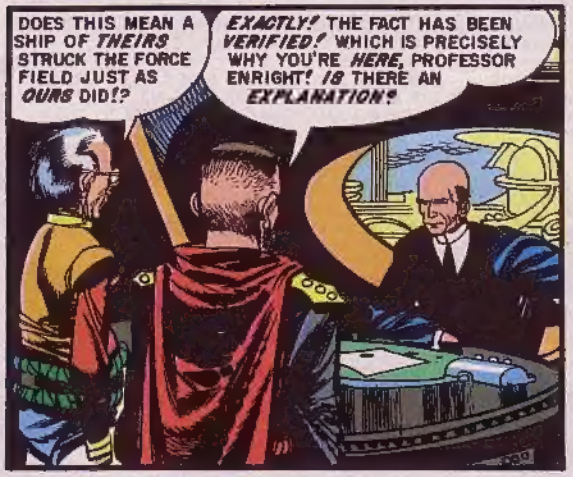
IT ALL SEEMED SO SENSELESS TO PROFESSOR ENRIGHT. WEARILY, HE RETURNED TO HIS LABORATORY. WHILE, ACROSS THE WORLD, OTHER MEN EMERGED FROM THEIRS ..

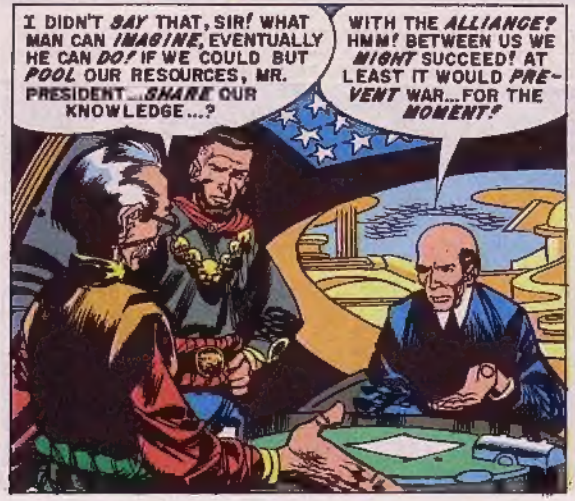


ACROSS THE WORLD ON THE FLAT PLAINS OF AN EASTERN ALLIANCE COUNTRY, MEN CHECKED ANOTHER ROCKET AND FOUND IT READY. AND SOON, ANOTHER TRAIL OF FIRE STREAKED INTO THE INFINITE VOID...

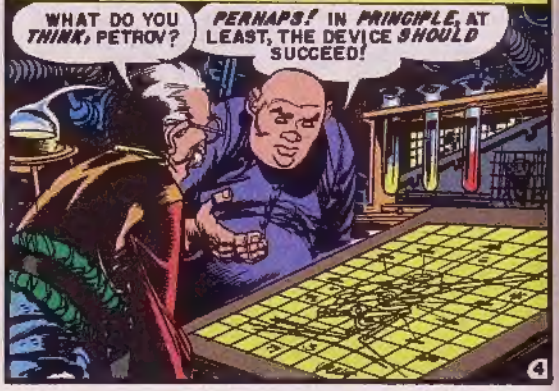
ANOTHER MAN-MADE MIRACLE HURTLED UPWARD TOWARD LUNA. AND AGAIN, IT WAS AS IF SOMETHING INVISIBLE...IMPALPABLE...RAISED UP A GIANT PALM...

BUT PROFESSOR ENRIGHT KNEW NOTHING OF THAT. NOT THEN. IT WAS SOME DAYS LATER THAT HE WAS SUMMONED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE WESTERN FEDERATION AND HANDED THE NOTE WITH ITS FORMAL DIPLOMATIC PHRASEOLOGY...





FOR THE MOMENT, PROFESSOR ENRIGHT FELT SUDDENLY TIRED. IT WAS ALL SO FUTILE. BUT, FOR THE MOMENT, HE COULD WORK WITH PETROV, THE ALLIANCE'S MOST BRILLIANT MIND! HE COULD FORGET THAT PETROV WAS AN ENEMY...



IF YOUR DEVICE CAN DIRECT *ENOUGH* NEGATIVE REACTION AGAINST THE FIELD, THE RESULT *SHOULD* BE THE NEGATION OF AT LEAST A *PORTION* OF THAT FIELD! I SAY, *YES*, ENRIGHT! *LET'S BUILD IT!*

SO, ONCE AGAIN, THE FORCES GLOWED. THE *STARFIRE X-2* WAS STRIPPED DOWN AND REFITTED, WHILE EARTH'S FEDERATIONS AND ALLIANCES WATCHED...JEALOUSLY...

EARTH REMAINED TWO ARMED CAMPS, YET THE WORK WENT ON. ONE DAY: THE *STARFIRE X-2* WAS READY. AND THIS TIME, WHEN SHE RODE HER TAIL OF FLAME SPACEWARD, SUSPICION RODE WITH HER...

THIS TIME, THERE WERE MEN IN HER WHO WERE NEW TO SPACE... MEN WHO WATCHED EVERY MOVE INTENTLY WHEN THE AGONY OF TAKE-OFF WAS OVER AND PROFESSOR ENRIGHT SAT AT THE CONTROLS...

NOW, GENTLEMEN, WE SHALL *SEE!* THE INSTRUMENTS SHOW THE FIELD TO BE *DIRECTLY AHEAD* OF US!

IF WE HAVE CALCULATED CORRECTLY, THE BEAM OF NEGATRONS WE SEND OUT WILL NEUTRALIZE A PORTION OF THAT FIELD. *READY*, GENTLEMEN? THEN I WILL *PRESS* THE *FIRING STUD*...

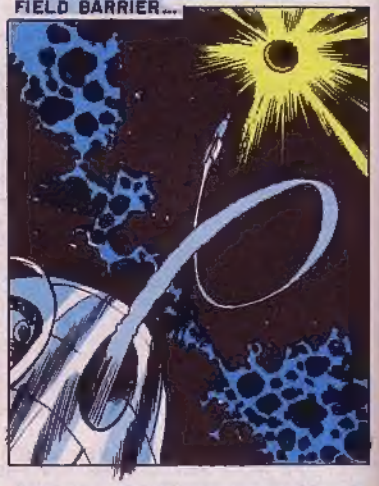
...*NOW!*

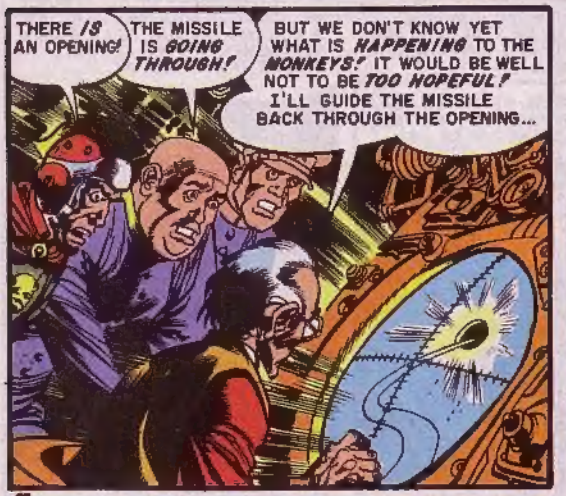
VING

VOOOM

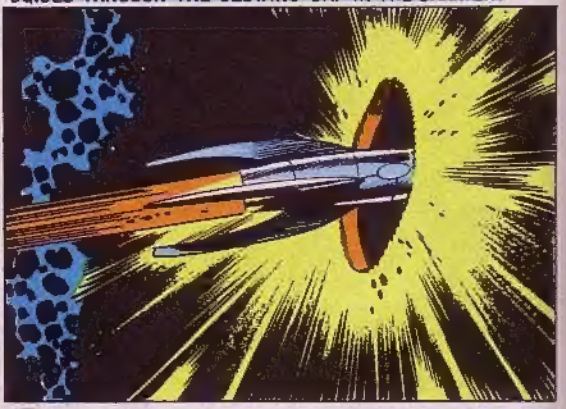
VIOLENCE! CORRUSCATING SHEETS OF RAW ENERGY! POWER TO RIVAL THE POWER OF THE SUN! THE EMPTINESS OF SPACE GLOWED...FLUORESCED... AND INSIDE THE SHIP, MEN SHUDDERED.

FROM A TINY PORT IN THE *STARFIRE'S* SIDE, A MONKEY-CARRYING TORPEDO-LIKE MISSILE STREAKED TOWARD THE GLOWING OPENING IN THE FORCE-FIELD BARRIER...

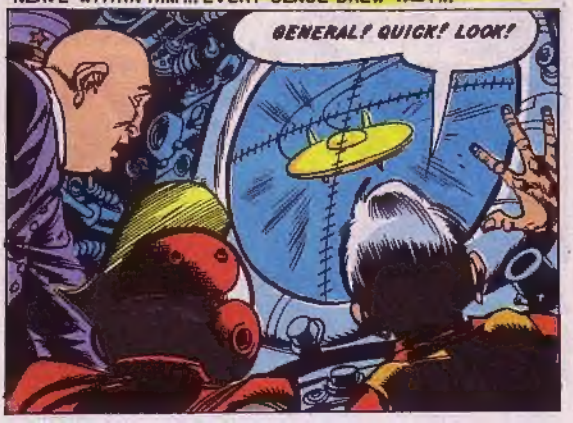




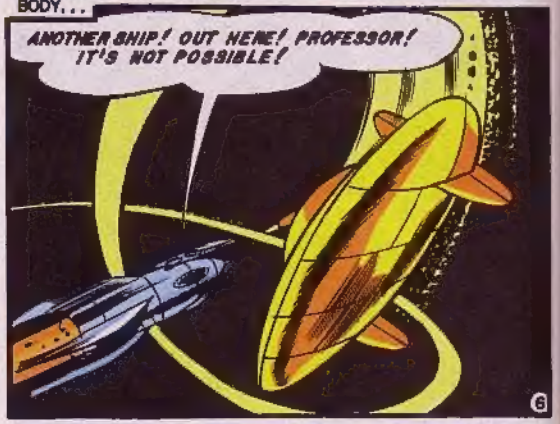
HOWEVER, ENRIGHT AND PETROV HAD PLANNED WELL. THE TESTS SHOWED THAT LATER. THE MONKEYS WERE FRIGHTENED...BUT HEALTHY AND UNHARMED. THE *STARFIRE* WAS GUIDED THROUGH THE GLOWING GAP IN THE BARRIER.



SO MAN COULD REACH FOR THE STARS AFTER ALL! SOMEHOW, THOUGH, PROFESSOR ENRIGHT FELT NO PRIDE. HE LEANED BACK...RELAXED... AND THEN, SUDDENLY, EVERY NERVE WITHIN HIM... EVERY SENSE DREW TAUT...



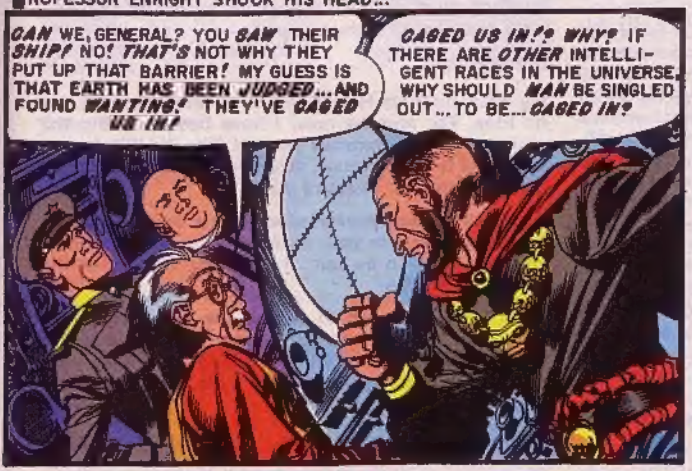
THE OTHER SHIP WAS FLAT... DISC-SHAPED... HUGE... INSCRUTABLE. IT CAME AT THEM AT IMPOSSIBLE SPEED, AND THERE WAS THREAT IN EVERY LINE OF ITS FORBIDDING BODY...



PROFESSOR ENRIGHT NODDED TO THE SCREEN...

THE FOOLS! THE POOR, PITYFUL FOOLS! EVEN THEN, THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND! THEY DID NOT GRASP, EVEN WHEN ENRIGHT TRIED TO EXPLAIN THAT MAN COULD NEVER REACH FOR THE STARS...

PROFESSOR ENRIGHT SHOOK HIS HEAD...



THE ANSWER WAS OBVIOUS... SO BITTERLY PITIFULLY OBVIOUS, EVEN THE GENERAL, IN HIS ARROGANCE, FINALLY UNDERSTOOD WHEN ENRIGHT POINTED IT OUT TO HIM...